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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 008932

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2015

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SUBJECT: NOTES FROM THE FIELD: CUCUTA, NORTE DE SANTANDER DEPARTMENT

REF: BOGOTA 8695

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

11. (C) Summary: In Cucuta, capital of Norte de Santander Department along the Venezuelan border, political leaders and opinion makers expressed concern about President Chavez's meddling in Colombia and Latin America in general. But few offered specifics. They said Colombia's Armed Forces are working to counter the return of FARC and ELN guerrillas to the Catatumbo region, made possible by the demobilization of paramilitary groups there. A complicating factor is the ease of movement across the Colombian-Venezuelan border. Corruption within the Venezuelan National Guard, varied application of migratory controls on the Venezuelan side of the border, and poor roads to Bogota were common expressions of concern. Interlocutors were optimistic about African palm and cacao production to the North and West of the capital. Sale of contraband Venezuelan gasoline is extensive and a major source of informal employment. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Poloff visited Cucuta, the capital of Norte de Santander Department, September 15-18, meeting with political, armed forces, and commercial leaders. Cucuta's roughly 900,000 residents make up the majority of the Department's 1.5 million inhabitants. Cucuta is the major land crossing for Colombian-Venezuelan commerce, and the transshipment point for some 70 percent of bilateral trade.

#### Relations with Venezuela

13. (C) Cucuta's land crossings (over a largely dry riverbed) with San Antonio and Urena appeared virtually unmonitored, particularly on the Colombian side. Venezuelan National Guard checkpoints exist several hundred meters beyond the actual border point. Colombian interlocutors described the initial checkpoints as perfunctory. Mario Alvarez Celis, Colombia's Consul in San Cristobal (formerly based in San Antonio), told Poloff that eight additional checkpoints existed on the road from Cucuta to San Cristobal. He described them as loaded with corruption, with Venezuelan National Guard members openly hostile toward Colombian nationals. (In order to travel beyond San Antonio and Urena, Colombian nationals require either a Venezuelan national identity document or a Colombian passport with Venezuelan visa. Venezuelan nationals may travel to any point in Colombia without a visa.) Alvarez, a former member of the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee, stated that support for Chavez is comparatively low in Tachira state, where Venezuelan citizens generally view Colombia as a commercial partner rather than a political enemy.

14. (C) Norte de Santander Governor Luis Miguel Morelli Navia worried about the degree of meddling of President Chavez in Colombia. He complained about the increasingly anti-Colombian discourse of President Chavez and Venezuela's massive arms buildup, noting that he had discussed his concerns with President Uribe. He also called attention to increasing levels of corruption in Venezuela, particularly among the armed forces, who now occupied virtually all key political positions. Morelli noted that a Bolivarian circle group operated in Cucuta. He was unable to provide an estimate, however, of active participants.

15. (C) The director (Javier Jose Cardenas) and members of the executive board of the Chamber of Commerce estimated that more than 80 percent of Cucuta's Colombian national residents had secured a Venezuelan national identity document (cedula) prior to the Venezuelan Referendum on Chavez. Chamber of Commerce officials expressed concern that recent strains in the bilateral relationship had translated into more hostile treatment of Colombian nationals by the Venezuelan National Guard. For example, until recently, Colombians could purchase gasoline at either domestic or international stations in Venezuela, where prices are significantly lower than in Colombia, by simply showing a Venezuelan cedula. At present, the international stations are closed by executive order of Chavez, and domestic stations require Colombians to show a Venezuelan residential phone or gas receipt in addition to a Venezuelan cedula. The Chamber's members welcomed African palm and cacao projects financed in part by

USAID, and pointed to nascent local coal production and exportation via Maracaibo, Venezuela. A major problem, however, was poor road infrastructure on the Colombian side, with trucks requiring roughly 15 hours to travel from Cucuta to Bogota (600 kilometers). Similarly, commercial land traffic to Colombia's Caribbean coast required some 10 hours.

#### Contraband of Gasoline

16. (U) Cucuta's streets are filled with vendors of Venezuelan gasoline, which costs a mere fraction of the pump price at Colombian gas stations. Also in evidence are 1970s and 80s model U.S. vehicles (Caprice, Impala, and the like), many of which have additional gas tanks that allow individuals to make cross-border runs in order to sell Venezuelan gasoline in Cucuta. Governor Morelli said that although the sale of contraband Venezuelan gasoline is a violation of Colombian law, the GOC permits the practice within the limits of Norte de Santander Department. Street vendors sell openly and apparently without concern for prosecution.

#### Public Security and Illegal Armed Groups

17. (C) Department of Administrative Security (DAS; rough FBI equivalent) Director Mauricio Rosales told Poloff that the GOC was attempting to address the evolving security situation in the conflictive Catatumbo region to the North and West of Cucuta. He said the demobilization of major paramilitary groups in the area had allowed the FARC and ELN, working largely in unison to traffic drugs, to return to the Catatumbo, and in particular to areas surrounding Tibu, San Calixto, Ocana, El Carmen, and La Gabarra. Rosales noted that FARC and ELN members easily moved back and forth between Colombian and Venezuelan territory in rural land crossings in the roughly 200-mile stretch border to the north of Cucuta. He stated that Venezuelan security forces do nothing to prevent establishment of FARC and ELN camps on the Venezuelan side of the border. Rosales indicated that the GOC's operation Strength II (Fortaleza II) had recently placed some 3500 COLMIL troops in the region.

#### Local Politics

18. (C) Cucuta Mayor Ramiro Suarez Corzo was detained in mid 2004 by the Colombian Prosecutor General's office (Fiscalia) for alleged ties to the paramilitaries, but was released after eight months for lack of evidence. Suarez's defense lawyer was Jaime Granados, a well-respected jurist and architect of Colombia's transition to the accusatory criminal justice system. Ciceron Florez, deputy editor of the leading regional daily, La Opinion, told Poloff that public opinion is sharply divided over the veracity of the Fiscalia's charges against Suarez, who is affiliated with the Colombia Alive party, a pro-Uribe movement that recently joined forces with the nascent National Unity party (reftel). Suarez told Poloff that he had received the personal support of President Uribe during his detention, and argued that the charges had been fabricated by former Prosecutor General Luis Camilo Osorio. Suarez suggested that his landslide victory in 2003 (roughly 80 percent of the vote) had motivated Osorio to presume that paramilitaries had pressured in favor of his election.

WOOD